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**The Report Committee for Heather J. Clift  
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**The Journey to *Mother of Invention***

**APPROVED BY  
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

**Supervisor:**

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Richard Lewis

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Cynthia McCreery

**The Journey to *Mother of Invention***

**by**

**Heather J. Clift, B.A.**

**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

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## **Dedication**

This is dedicated to my family, who have supported and encouraged me to keep pursuing my dream against great odds; and to all the loved ones we've lost on this leg of the journey, who are deeply missed and never forgotten.

## **Acknowledgements**

For their dedication, endless patience, and inspiration, I would like to thank my parents, David Clift and Pamela Kelley. You constantly remind me that our struggles are not ours alone and I hope I can give back even half as much as you've given me. To all my instructors, teaching assistants, and classmates at the University of Texas in Austin, I am grateful for the honest feedback, the knowledge and expertise that was shared freely and generously, the kindness and understanding that was extended to me, and for the many lessons learned, both personally and professionally. Thank you for sharing this stretch of what has been a long and winding road.

## **Abstract**

### **The Journey to *Mother of Invention***

Heather J. Clift, M.F.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2016

Supervisor: Richard Lewis

This report elucidates the writing process of *Mother of Invention*, a one-hour crime drama, from initial inspiration to current incarnation.

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## **Chapter 1: The Beginning Before the Beginning**

I've been told every writer must be able to answer a simple question about their story before a single letter can be typed: "Why now?" So naturally, as I sit down to write this report, the question of why is a heavy weight. Why this script? Why now? While I won't pretend to have all the answers — or any, for that matter — what I can promise is to do my best.

I will start with the question of "Why this script?" Why is this the story pouring out of me at this moment in my life? I've been asking myself this question a lot lately. When you have twelve people giving you their opinion on pieces of an unfinished draft every week, it's easy to lose yourself. Your purpose. Your mind. When I sat down to choose a thesis script I realized something terrifying — I didn't like any of my options. I felt like I'd been writing chapters in someone else's book for the last two years. I spent quite a bit of time grappling with that unwieldy fact before I could even think about rewriting. But I had to choose something, so I went with the one script others seemed to think wasn't half bad. "Sometimes you just have to jump out the window and grow wings on the way down," as Ray Bradbury put it. Story. Of. My life. But I digress... The point is, this realization forced another: I couldn't answer either of the questions posed above. Sure, I had some kind of answer when I first pitched the idea to the class, but I was now aware that whatever answer that was must have been B.S. I couldn't even begin to approach my thesis before coming up with an answer that wasn't. And thus began the digging.

I'd set aside the questions for a while as the last semester of classes occupied my time and energy, but when May rolled around I could no longer avoid them. They'd roamed those dark recesses long enough and as the final class of the graduate program



drew to a close, nothing was more prevalent on my mind. And then finally, it came to me out of nowhere. The reason I wrote this script in the first place...

It was because of my grandparents.

They were like most Americans. They followed the rules. Chased the Dream. Worked hard and raised their children. They honored their debts and taught their children to do the same. My grandfather worked a variety of jobs to make ends meet — dock worker, door-to-door sales, key-maker — while my grandmother toiled away in restaurants and retail. Together they provided for their family, managing to buy a modest home in the suburbs of Toledo, Ohio. The home in which my mother grew up. When a co-worker of my grandmother's approached them about opening a business, they jumped at the chance. It was 1990. My grandmother had been in this country almost forty years. She'd worked hard to learn English, to reduce her thick German accent, to throw off the American perception that she was a Nazi and blend in. She never even taught her kids German, so determined was she to assimilate. And now here she was — an American business owner. Words cannot describe the pride my family felt when my grandparents opened their deli. It was a small, simple place, but a huge step. A sign that hard work really does pay off. That the American Dream isn't dead.

And then the rug was yanked out from underneath them. I suppose my grandfather noticed some discrepancies in their accounts. Maybe the money wasn't adding up and profits were disappearing. Whatever the impetus, he confronted their partner and the next thing they knew, she was gone. She had vanished, taking all their money with her and leaving them on the hook for the debts the business had incurred. *And they honored their debts.* They had to sell the house they'd raised their children in and move into a small, dark apartment in a cheaper part of town. My grandparents were

sixty years old and everything they'd worked for their whole lives was gone. Seven years later, my grandfather was dead of a heart attack — found slumped over a pile of bills.

Though I did not see it for myself, this image of my grandfather never left me. I was ten years old when their business went under and although this wasn't my first taste of injustice, somehow it cut deeper and never quite healed. Not long after my grandfather's death, I was working in a small coffee shop in suburban Toledo. I'd been away for a few years, attending high school in Arizona. The names and faces of the area were all new to me now and the memories had long since faded. So when I heard a long-lost name catch in the air, I froze. It was as if time had ruptured, leaking unwanted past into the present. *Linda Zepke*. It came from the lips of my boss. She was telling a co-worker about a friend of hers who'd gone into business at the behest of a partner, but now sensed something "off" about the woman. My boss hadn't yet said who the partner was, but the scenario felt familiar. So I asked for the name and there it was: *Linda Zepke*. The woman who ruined my grandparents. I fell apart. Right there in front of God and everybody, I came unspooled. And then I told my boss I needed to speak with her friend... But it was too late for her. The papers were signed, the business created. The swindle all but complete.

It made me wonder. How many times was this woman going to get away with this? How many victims were there before my grandparents? How many were yet to come? Would she ever be caught? Did she ever feel guilty? What kind of person can destroy other people's lives out of habit, as if it's a profession like any other?

## **Chapter 2: First Incarnation: *The Short* (2009)**

I hadn't thought about my grandparents' ordeal in years. It wasn't part of my daily consciousness. And yet it must have still lain dormant within me, for when I sat down to write my first short script in the hopes of producing and directing it, what poured out of me was a thirteen page exploration of human greed, depravity, and gross justification for "survival of the fittest." Perhaps the recession had unlocked this particular cell memory. Or perhaps it was the arrest of Bernie Madoff, which was still shocking the world when I began my first draft in January 2009. Whatever it was that made it resurface, I wasn't conscious of it at the time. In fact, I'm never conscious of what has inspired me to write until long after the fact. I just put a keyboard under my fingertips and let flow what may, whether song or screenplay.

What flowed on this particular occasion came to be called "The Lies That Bind." It centered on an upper middle class couple who resorted to murder and cannibalism to cover up the husband's white collar crime and maintain their family's cushy suburban lifestyle. The theme of the story has remained the same from its earliest days. It's an exploration of the myriad justifications people have for their wrongdoings. An examination of the American Dream and the lengths people will go to achieve it and then to maintain it. In this early version of the story, the husband (James Pierce) was killing off witnesses that could testify against him in court and the wife (Margaret Pierce) was disposing of the bodies by serving them up for dinner. Being a short, there was no room in the narrative for delving into the case, the crime, or even into the characters all that deeply. The big reveal at the end was a dead body in their freezer after several pages of build-up and insinuation to get the audience good and curious about what the heck is

going on with this family (or at least that was the idea anyway, I'm not claiming it was successful).

I'll leave the story of filming this short for another time, but needless to say it never saw the light of day. I always had it in the back of my head that I would do something more with the script, though. I didn't quite know what it wanted to be, but I imagined it as a feature for a time. The short had established the characters of James, Margaret, and their two kids, the general premise and of course, the theme. There was still much more to probe. I wanted to know what made them tick and how far they could go before getting caught. Would they ever get caught at all? And what would happen if and when they did? Would they get convicted? Would someone or something step in to rescue them from themselves (and others from them)?

Years later, when I made the decision to brave graduate school, I dug it back up, gave it a polish and a name change, and submitted it as part of my application with a cross of the fingers (Appendix A).

### **Chapter 3: Second Incarnation: *Journey to a Pilot* (2014/15)**

#### **THE FIRST LEG**

Over the winter break of 2014/15, I spent some time planning my projects for the upcoming Introduction to TV Writing course. Having never written a television script before, I was nervous about learning a new format. I didn't want to try writing a pilot from scratch with all new characters in half a semester, so my plan was to use pre-existing material. In fact, I had a feature in mind that I'd been obsessing over for a few years. It seemed ripe for further development and I figured I could hit the ground running with that the following semester. Yet somehow, "The Lies That Bind" came back to haunt me. I went on a meditation retreat during the break and, of course, instead of clearing and purifying like it was supposed to, my mind chose to occupy itself with story ideas. Go figure. I guess all that dredging up of mental junk caused an oldie but goodie to surface — but in a whole new iteration. This time, I imagined not only expanding the short into a television show, but it would be a supernatural cult series at that.

A long time ago, I'd read about the Aghori sadhus of India who eat everything from human flesh to garbage in an effort to purify their souls of all craving, aversion, and judgment. In the Aghori worldview, there is no right or wrong, no "good" or "bad," only pure and impure. This lent an interesting new dimension to my view of the Pierce family. I began to think of them as victims of circumstance rather than mere perpetrators without conscience. I wondered how their decision to begin consuming human flesh might have transformed them and what hidden forces they might have unleashed as a result. There have been reports of people going insane committing an act of cannibalism. The question is, what came first — the insanity or the act? This became like a zen koan to me and I mulled it over in my mind, allowing these newfound queries to chisel a new shape from

an old story. By the end of the meditation retreat, I'd made up my mind. I was going to rewrite "The Lies That Bind" into a one-hour supernatural drama.

One of the first things we learned when it came time to write a pilot in the Introduction to TV Writing course is that the pilot bible must come before anything else. On an actual series, this would be an official show bible, but for the purpose of the class, we were to write an abridged version that would cover the show's tone, world, characters, and season one arc in 5-10 pages (as opposed to a show bible, which could be upwards of 50).

I learned early on in this process that television writing was going to be even more of a challenge than I'd expected. Having only written shorts and features, I was accustomed to writing plot-driven material and tended to develop characters accordingly. In other words, my character development skills needed some development of their own. Up until this point, I allowed instinct to dictate who my characters needed to be in order to move the plot forward in the most interesting way. I hadn't sat down to think about who these people were at their deepest levels. As a result, my characters tended to be some version of myself taken to one extreme or another (but that's bound to be the case to some extent no matter what a writer does).

All this "development" happened at a subconscious level, though, so sitting down to write a pilot bible for the first time was quite a challenge. It took me a while to fully understand what it takes to populate a series with characters, relationships, and situations that would fuel season after season of an ongoing series. Even more intriguing was the conundrum of how to fit all that into sixty succinct pages that would be sufficient to pique an audience's interest and yet leave plenty of room for more story without holding back my "best stuff" for later and also without revealing too much too soon. Oi!

With all that in mind, I set to writing the pilot bible for the supernatural cult version of “The Lies That Bind” (Appendix B). In this pilot, the family transforms mentally and emotionally after consuming human flesh during the three-month time period of James’ trial. This weakens their psychological state, making them vulnerable to a supernatural cult that preys on them and others like them — morally compromised individuals. The cult recruits them, starting with Margaret, aiming to “purify” the world by transforming all of humanity into cannibals. The ringleader is a powerful Aghori ghost, thousands of years old, who has possessed at least as many people in his time — including world leaders, corporate executives, and law enforcement officials. The organization is well connected, to say the least.

The focal point of this version of the series is two-fold: On one hand, we follow an FBI agent’s investigation into the Pierce family’s disappearance after James’ acquittal (Special Agent Tandy Martin, who had her own run-in with the supernatural cult as a child). On the other, we follow the Pierce family, their transformation well under way by the time the pilot starts. In fact, this pilot begins with the daughter, Alyssa Pierce, showing up in a small town police precinct covered in human bite marks, then promptly disappearing before S.A. Martin arrives on the scene. Eventually, the Pierce case would lead her to investigate a worldwide conspiracy connected to the supernatural cult and that would become the focal point of the series.

Although this particular version of the story didn’t go very far, it did bring Special Agent Tandy Martin into the story. Other than that, all that’s left of this iteration is the framework of a supernatural cult series I will eventually revisit in some form. I’m still fascinated by the Aghoris and the idea of a supernatural conspiracy, not to mention the theme of greed and consumption (which has been one of the few constants throughout

this story's journey). However, the class was pushing for a case of the week — and rightly so — whereas I was more interested in focusing on the Pierces and Tandy Martin in a serialized show. And that just wasn't going to work for a supernatural drama.

Another thing that became clear from the notes I received at this stage was that people were more interested in Margaret and her motivations than anything else. I think this was driven in part by the fact that I'd finally settled on a title for the series at this point: *Mother of Invention*. The inspiration for it was Margaret's primary motivation of protecting herself and her family — of surviving —which, in her mind, means protecting their lifestyle. For Margaret, this is an absolute necessity and she would do anything to accomplish her task, resulting in all manner of justifications on her part. Knowing by now that the most crucial fuel for a series is character, I knew I had to go back to the drawing board and refocus on her. The title itself necessitated it (pun intended). This simple change became something of a North Star for my development process going forward. Though, as it turns out, I still had a lot to learn in navigating my way there...

## THE SECOND LEG

From here, I explored the idea of making *Mother of Invention* into a dark dramedy, with notes from the class to use *Desperate Housewives* or *Weeds* as models. This was compelling for a while, and I came up with what I thought was a decent start to a pilot treatment (Appendix C). In this version, Margaret is a spoiled housewife who has never had to work a day in her life until her husband James is arrested for committing fraud. Up until that moment, nannies had raised her kids while she spent her days getting mani-pedis, doing hot yoga, and zapping her cellulite.

However, this Margaret wasn't always a pampered dilettante. She'd grown up poor in rural Ohio and was easily lured by the confident and debonair James while they



were in college. He wooed her with stories of family money, private jets, and villas in the Alps and she bought it all hook, line, and sinker. Little did she know it was all a smokescreen and that James had been snowing her since the day they met. There was no family money, he'd never stepped foot on a private jet, and there were certainly no villas — in the Alps or anywhere else. He was always a fraud and though Margaret did question a few things in the early days, James was adept at weaving and dodging. In the end, she decided it wasn't worth the effort or risk to her relationship to bother him with such inquiries — at least that's what she told herself. The truth is she cared more about all the things he was promising her and as long as he could deliver on them, she didn't much care how he went about it.

The vapid Margaret of this incarnation gets a terrible wake-up call when James is hauled off to prison. She then goes haywire, desperately lashing out at anyone she thinks might be able to bury her husband and therefore her lifestyle. She kills without compunction, telling herself it's necessary, it's survival. Of course, her idea of survival is hanging onto her suburban mansion, hired help, and days of laying by the pool when yoga sounds too strenuous. The last thing she could ever imagine is having to clean a dish or help a kid with homework, so when James' money is cut off as a result of the investigation and the nanny quits, she spirals out of control.

Make no mistake — this character is not likable, nor is she meant to be. The fun of this version of the show is watching Margaret fall apart as she realizes she must now do things for herself. The idea is to laugh at her ridiculousness, cry for her poor children, and gasp at the horror of her endless justifications and all around contemptibility. This Margaret is meant to be a character we love to hate. Someone whose comeuppance we revel in. A proxy for every evil person in this world we want to see go down in flames of

their own making. We want S.A. Martin to catch this woman and her husband and hold them accountable for every bit of damage their ilk has done to the world.

Alas, the class shot this version down. Margaret was just too awful. Someday I'll attempt to write a better character we love to hate, but for the brief allotment of time I had to develop all this (there was less than a month left in the semester at this point), it seemed more expedient to keep moving. And so I did...

### **THE AMALGAMATION OF LEGS**

In an effort to salvage some of the work I'd put in thus far, I attempted to combine the supernatural cult and dark dramedy ideas in the form of a new outline. In it, the ghost of a recently executed serial killer/cannibal named Declan Phelps finds Margaret in her hour of need as she despairs over how she's supposed to take care of her kids on her own and somehow keep James out of prison.

Arising out of notes from the class that Margaret needed a more compelling and understandable reason to resort to cannibalism, this outline laid the responsibility for that at Declan's feet. He takes advantage of her, swooping in at her most vulnerable point and gaining her trust in order to manipulate her into doing his bidding.

This story detour was abandoned almost immediately, having a great many holes and character issues — the biggest being that Declan's presence robs Margaret of agency, rendering her nothing but a useless puppet.

And thus ended the rather brief dalliance in a comedic version of *Mother of Invention*... for the most part, anyway. It would seem that remnants of this found their way into my first draft, but more on that later. What did remain from these legs of the journey was much of the character development. The addition of Margaret's backstory of growing up in rural Ohio and her relationship history with James was all new. Special

Agent Tandy Martin also benefitted in this phase, gaining a stronger backstory as to why she chose her career path. In fact, she took on more traits of my grandparents' story than any other character, with her parents experiencing a very similar downfall. These all became important developments for what would culminate in the first draft of the pilot.

### **APPROACHING THE SINGULARITY**

By this point, I was feeling thoroughly lost in gimbal lock. My process was proving to be an endless nightmare that promised to keep me stuck in a pre-writing black hole for eternity. In fact, the word “process” seemed like a sad euphemism. Maybe this is true for every writer and no one wants to admit it out loud or share their dirty little secret, I don't know. I do know that I spent an inordinate amount of time beating my head against a blank page wondering what the heck my problem was that I couldn't just pick one direction and follow it through to the end.

When I find myself in a creative tailspin like this, the only thing I can do is stop. Even if I don't want to, my brain does it for me. It simply ceases to produce any new thoughts for a while — like I fed it too much ice cream way too fast. To get beyond the brain freeze, I have to let it rest for a few days, maybe more, until my mind is ready to come back online. On my better days, I focus on something else for a while — something productive. I'll catch up on television shows or movies in the hopes of gaining some inspiration, or I might read a book. On lesser days, I slip into the black hole and wallow for a while in my failings as a writer, which of course get obsessively blown up into my failings as a human being. Ah, the joys of being creative. The good thing about grad school, though, is that there's no dearth of options for occupying the mind in a more productive manner. As a result, I probably had fewer of the lesser days than I otherwise

would have, especially in Spring 2015, as I was busier that semester than any other. Thank goodness for small favors.

### **THE FIRST DRAFT, MAY 2015**

In the final week of the Introduction to TV Writing class, my brain rebooted itself and was off to the races. It seems I'd sat long enough with all the feedback I'd gotten for it to finally absorb into my thick skull. I didn't have time to go back and write a new pilot bible, treatment, or outline, but I had a strong sense of what needed to be done for now. So I jumped in full speed without a map or directions. *Sometimes you just have to jump out the window and grow wings on the way down.*

One of my classmates had made a suggestion that perhaps Margaret grew up as a cannibal and wanted to get away from the life, but is forced back in now. Everyone suggested that I needed a better reason for her to be killing (ala *Dexter*) that would make her more palatable for an audience. That note was constantly echoed throughout. However, what I wanted to explore was the outrageous justification process that someone goes through to convince themselves that doing something horrendous doesn't make them a horrendous person. That their reasons somehow validate their means. It wasn't until hearing this classmate's note that I began to find a way through the chaos of my own creative process. I had already come up with the backstory that could lay the foundation for something akin to what my classmate was suggesting. I wasn't comfortable with Margaret being raised as a cannibal, but it provided something for me to work with.

The result was that when I sat down to start on the first draft, I took the backstory of Margaret growing up on a farm and superimposed it on the idea that she grew up as a cannibal. The compromise I made, though, in integrating the note was that Margaret witnessed something as a child that scarred her for life and created a sort of memory

feedback loop in her brain that altered the reality of the situation into something it wasn't. I did not want her nuclear family to be solely responsible for making her a cannibal. I wanted the inception of cannibalism as a regular practice to rest squarely on Margaret's shoulders. It needed to be her choice and it needed to be something she felt was a necessary evil. For me, the whole premise of the show rested on that because it spoke to the ultimate theme that propelled me to write it in the first place. The seed could be planted in her childhood and the tree could grow of its own accord, but when it came to harvesting its fruit, that had to be all Margaret. She needed to be ground zero. Otherwise, she wouldn't be the focus of this show because this show explores the process of becoming. It's an origin story, of sorts.

I got as far as writing the Teaser in the class, presenting it on the last day (Appendix D). It was the fastest five pages I'd written in the program thus far and probably still is even now. I was proud of having broken through the walls of chaos and indecision to present something — anything — even if the class hated it. I'd decided that Margaret's father owned a slaughterhouse in which she was accustomed to seeing animals meet their fate in a meat grinder. This was somewhat inspired by my own stint in rural America as a kid. Though my parents owned neither a farm nor a slaughterhouse, we did rent a house on a farm for a while and I'd apparently witnessed the neighbors slaughtering chickens when I was small (story for another time). I imagined Margaret being used to these sights and therefore desensitized by the time she was nine, which is the timeframe of the flashback that occupies the Teaser. However, when little Margaret wakes up one night to the sounds of men's angry voices in the distance, she cannot possibly be prepared for what she finds upon further investigation — her father in the midst of grinding a human body. In my mind, this was an isolated incident and Margaret's

father had killed the man accidentally during an altercation. The grinding was a panic move done out of necessity. Yet for little Margaret, small and impressionable, it became an ongoing nightmare that never quite left her. Over the years, she concluded that there must have been more victims, but could never bring herself to confront her father.

Lucky for me, the class didn't hate this Teaser and that bit of validation for having managed a few pages of something that wasn't complete crap was enough to keep me moving toward a first draft. I kept working until the draft was complete on May 20th — just in time to meet the Austin Film Festival final deadline. After I sent it to AFF, I submitted it to the department's internal screenplay competition. I knew it was far from perfect, especially since I'd written it in a steady flow without a break or feedback beyond the Teaser. When I submitted it to these competitions, I was very much looking forward to the feedback. I didn't want to lose momentum, for that is the fastest death to my writing process. I needed to keep moving and my intention was to complete a second draft by the end of the summer. But I also needed input.

## Chapter 4: Third Incarnation: *Journey to Thesis* (2016)

### *COLLECTING FEEDBACK*

Summer 2015 came and went without much in the way of feedback. I did get a couple notes from the readers of the departmental competition, for which I was grateful. These identified an issue with character development (one reader wanted to know more about what Margaret was grappling with in the present, as opposed to relying solely on the flashbacks) and the plot (an Act I that drags). However, I didn't feel that was enough to launch me into a second draft. I still needed a wider perspective on what needed to be done. So I waited (cue Fugazi's "Waiting Room")...

And waited...

Aaaand waited.

In the meantime, another opportunity for feedback had surfaced. The only catch was that I had to post my script on a public site where industry professionals could go to peruse the latest efforts of screenwriting hopefuls everywhere. The idea of posting a script I knew to be sub-par on a public forum where it would become someone's first impression of my writing made me feel ill. I put it off. I considered bowing out, telling my instructor thanks but no thanks. After all, "a beginning is a delicate time" (to quote the 1984 film adaptation of Frank Herbert's *Dune*) and I did not want some random industry person to think I'm a crap writer. It was bad enough to risk having classmates and instructors think that week after week, but to have a nameless faceless person judging me was just too much.

After much brow-beating from classmate and instructor alike, I finally gave in and posted the darn thing. So, in November I got my first bit of thorough feedback. And here it is:

Strengths:

*What the script has going for it most is its consistent tone, its pacing, and its quality character work. Despite the fact the material leaves much to be desired in terms of its world-building (more on this below), that's not to take away from the quality of the slow conveying of Margaret's dark side. Also, it is worth noting the quality of story's dialogue and prose, and the fluid nature of the read makes for quite the page-turner. All said, the pilot script checks many of the boxes required of quality crime dramas, but some additional consideration should be given to the narrative wrinkles as dictated below, as currently these issues detract from the viability of the series.*

Weaknesses:

*The biggest issue with the script is that one fails to get a sense of story differentiation, as would effect future episodes in the series. Though the pilot script does a well enough job introducing the characters in play and the circumstances that lead to Margaret being reduced to her more primal / killer ways, the pilot fails to indicate the "bigger world" in play – which makes the series seem very limited. For example: consider the television series "Dexter": though the pilot episode eases one into Dexter's life, it also shows how his personal life intersects with his professional life as a cop, which hints at the idea that future criminals will succumb to his blade. As is, in "Mother of Invention," the narrative seems so focused on showing Margaret and her family life that one fails to get a sense of the larger world in play.*

TV series potential:

*Despite the well-written nature of the material, as is, the project faces a steep uphill battle in terms of being produced, given that the concept seems very limiting – i.e.*



*once the wife goes and kills all those she considers potential witnesses, where does the story go from here? It also remains to be seen how her husband's incarceration is to be kept "fresh" from a reader's perspective. Though the bible answers some of these questions, currently, its barebones nature further proves the limited nature of this concept.*

This feedback was not too disheartening. It highlighted issues I was already aware of but couldn't quite articulate and wasn't sure how to correct just yet. The next couple rounds of feedback were rougher, both of which I received in December (Appendix E). The notes served to highlight the many issues with the script. So many, in fact, that I wasn't sure where to start or how exactly it could be salvaged.

When the time came to choose a thesis script, I still hadn't made heads or tails of how to go about fixing all the problems with *Mother of Invention* and it didn't feel worthwhile to try. It was my first attempt at a pilot, after all. I thought, "Maybe I don't have what it takes to make a story like this work yet. Maybe I need more time to mature as a writer. Or maybe I'll never be able to pull it off. Maybe this kind of script just isn't my strength." I didn't know. But I explored every other possibility for my thesis and it didn't take long for me to eliminate the other options, so I gave in and accepted that I would have to find some way to make *Mother of Invention* viable.

### **CREATING A REVISION PLAN**

Lost as I was, I'd somehow managed to come up with a vague structure for a rewrite, though still a bit gun-shy to actually implement it. I knew it was going to tear up everything I'd written in the first draft, so it was daunting to say the least. Nonetheless, after some months of having this new structure wander around my cerebral cavity and not

coming up with any better way, it seemed apparent there wasn't one. So it looked like I was going to keep most of the Teaser, then do a flashback to three weeks earlier in Act I, two weeks earlier in Act II, and one week earlier in Act III, then pick up where we left off in the Teaser at the top of Act IV. In short, I was going to throw out 99% of my first draft. Yippee!

Going into the thesis committee meeting, this was all I knew. I also knew my committee members could easily suggest a different approach entirely, so I didn't pin too many hopes on my new plan. The meeting dug deep into the problems with the characters and story, as well as the tone, which as it turned out was more comedic in certain scenes than was suitable for the crime drama I'd settled on writing. Other than that, here is a sampling of the main issues as discussed in this meeting:

Margaret:

- *We want to root for her, but she's cold. She needs to be more flawed and likable so when she does go into the killing spree, we will still root for her. That way it's more shocking when she starts killing people. Right now the audience almost expects her to do this. When she cooks for Karen and she's so evil, we see she's just a psychopath. It's okay if she gets to that point, but current draft feels like she starts that way. She seems like an automaton who feels Terminator-like. Would love to feel for her in the way we felt for Dexter. Right now it's like American Psycho. Need to see her have a moment for pause before she starts killing people. Want to see the moment of decision.*

Relationships:

- *Need more information about James' and Margaret's relationship.*

- *Want to play up the father-daughter relationship between Lee and Margaret.*

Plot:

- *Could bring her parents into Margaret's world at a party and have them embarrass her by being country bumpkins. Lucas would be there, too.*
- *End on Margaret opening trunk w/Lucas in it and telling Dad he's gonna help her w/this.*
- *Wary of having Margaret resort to cannibalism in the pilot.*

### **RESEARCHING AND RE-SHAPING**

My committee's notes provided a solid foundation on which to finally approach a second draft, and with their stamp of approval on my rough revision plan, I was ready to go. The party as suggested above became the opening to Act I, and though I wrote a draft that included Tandy here, it ultimately didn't make sense when I came up with the idea to use another fraud case as the impetus for the FBI investigation into James' company, Pierce-Braeburn. This idea was born out of a desire to educate the audience on the particulars of a fraud case as soon as possible in order to paint a clearer picture of both James' and Tandy's worlds (as per a note I'd received from one of the evaluations shown in Appendix E). The problem was, I couldn't have that fraud case be James' because as I did more research, it became obvious that no investigator worth their salt would risk tipping off the subject of a fraud case too soon. In these kinds of investigations, timing is crucial and approaching the subject too soon results in an immediate flushing of evidence. Tandy Martin is a sharp FBI agent at the top of her field and wouldn't make such a fatal mistake.

In order to fully explore the fraud investigation, then, I needed to use a proxy — another financial criminal who gets caught and introduces us to Tandy and her tactics. As

I continued to explore this case, I realized it was not only a great way to introduce the audience to Tandy's world and her personal convictions, but would also be an excellent way to put James' company on her radar. From there, the rabbit hole went deeper and deeper until James became the next Bernie Madoff — only sneakier since he's hiding out in small town America and conducting his shadier business via a dummy corporation.

Exploring the investigation did pose a serious problem for me as a writer, though. I knew next to nothing about such things, so this was about as far out of my comfort zone as I could get. I'd feel more comfortable writing about the intricacies of space travel — which I also know nothing about, but at least I find that interesting! Everything about finance and our economic system, on the other hand, bores the living daylights out of me. Oi. Lucky for me I live in the internet age and therefore can have just about anything I need to know at my fingertips in seconds flat. A few key websites provided understanding of the inner workings of our financial system and its abuses. However, there is a surprising paucity of information about the nitty gritty details of a fraud investigation online. There are some good tidbits here and there, but as far as understanding the full scope and the approach an FBI agent might take to such a case: nada. After coming up empty on the interwebs, I sought refuge in a good, old-fashioned book — Stephen Pedneault's *Anatomy of a Fraud Investigation: From Detection to Prosecution*. This is how I learned I couldn't do anything in Tandy's storyline that would tip James and gang off too soon, which drove my decision to remove Tandy from the Act I opening.

Studying the Bernie Madoff case was the biggest help for fleshing out the Pierce-Braeburn end of things. Here are a few highlights of Madoff's "business practices" I found particularly helpful in fleshing out this aspect of *Mother of Invention*:

- *Kept his illegitimate money in one bank account and clean money in another*
- *Fabricated trades*
- *Employed Options Backdating: When a company waits until its stock price falls to a low, then moves higher within a two-month period. The company then grants an officer an option to purchase the stock at the price it was at or near its lowest point, even though the stock is now much higher.*
- *Used information systems to create fraudulent financial reporting tools (had 9 computer programs designed to create false and fraudulent books)*
- *Had separate floors for his brokerage (legit, totally transparent) & hedge fund (scam, very limited access to floor)*
- *Hired staff with no financial background who were basically just clerks*
- *Computer that created the phony statements for investors is isolated in secluded office, not connected to rest of company's system. All records maintained on paper.*

If a multi-tiered approach to financial crime was good enough for the most infamous fraud in recent history, it was good enough for James Pierce and gang. So, I co-opted a few of the above and pinned them on James. Hence, the computer in James' closet (also hinting at the software programs designed for creating fraudulent records), separate floors for the executives versus everyone else, and isolating the fraudulent activity of Affinity Investments into a dummy corporation (as in the separate accounts for clean and dirty money above). Once I had a handle on how exactly the fraud was perpetrated and how Tandy would come to suspect Pierce-Braeburn, the rest was comparatively smooth sailing in terms of shaping the plot.

## **A BRIGHTER SPOTLIGHT ON THE CHARACTERS**

By that time, I had enough backstory to flesh out Margaret, James, and Tandy from previous pilot bible drafts to make for a decent trifecta of characters. The problem with the first draft is that I had all that information in the pilot bible, but not in the script. The challenge in this rewrite, then, was finding a way to fit as much of it in as possible without weighing down the narrative or dialogue. I was able to fit in all the Margaret backstory I wanted for the pilot: her country upbringing, her parents, and how her country club peers view her. I'd also written a version of Margaret's and James' fight in Act III in which his backstory of growing up poor in Detroit came out, but it seemed to take some steam out of their relationship dynamic. There needed to be an imbalance between them, with Margaret being dependent and James being guarded about his past. Despite his love for his wife, he still fears he would lose her if she knew the truth. This also provides fuel for future story in that it gives Margaret more to discover later on, which will open up greater opportunity for relationship conflict. (Incidentally, following my committee supervisor's note to change the Act I opening from an anniversary party to one honoring James was also helpful for shaping James' and Margaret's relationship dynamic).

I also made some changes to the Pierces' son, Cameron (originally Marcus), as I wanted to give him plenty of room to grow over the course of the series. In the preceding versions, he was described as "wise beyond his years," but this was devised in the original short, which takes place well into James' trial. What I realized in developing the story further is that the ordeal with the fraud investigation and its effects on his parents is what drives Marcus/Cameron to take on the "man of the house" mantle. Therefore, it made more sense to start him off as a typical thirteen-year-old in this pilot. By the end of this script, he is already showing signs of change. This also provides an opening for future conflict as his faith in his parents and the world they've built for him comes into

question. Since he's already experiencing the sudden mood changes that are the earmark of adolescence, there is a threat that Cameron could swing to a dangerous extreme in the face of the turmoil the fraud case will create. Will he turn to drugs? Sex? Juvenile crime? Or will he keep it together as everyone around him crumbles? All are possibilities.

Adding Margaret's parents to the party scene at the beginning turned out to be a very helpful suggestion as well. Getting them into the story right away gave me room to explore Margaret's personal history even more. The fact that Peggy fears her husband, Lee, is embarrassing their daughter at the party in the beginning speaks volumes about the state of their relationship to Margaret. It also serves to highlight the differences between Margaret and her country club peers, Susan and Genevieve, in the form of their commentary after Lee and Peggy leave the party. The greatest benefit, however, is that it opens up the conflict between father and daughter right off the bat. It becomes a perfect way to introduce the cantankerous Lee and his anti-corporate, anti-CEO worldview, which is a strong source of conflict between him and his daughter. This also lent more flashback fodder, with Margaret's conflicted trip home stirring up her past trauma.

As for poor Lucas, his death has been the most difficult to get right because it is the clinch-pin of readers' initial impression of Margaret. The first draft left readers feeling cold and unwilling to explore this "psychotic killer." The most glaring issue here is that this death happens in the first four pages of the first draft. With no prior image of Margaret established, this Teaser leaves nowhere to go once she is revealed to be a killer who seems to be without conscience. Thus considerable time has been spent trying to massage this moment in order to preserve the best aspects of the original Teaser without turning off the audience to Margaret before they have the chance to get to know her.

The solution we came up with in the thesis meeting was to keep most of the Teaser the same, but stop short of her killing Lucas and make Margaret look like the victim. Sounds easy enough. However, it turned out to be a tricky balance. I needed to start off with Margaret looking like the victim yet give her a compelling reason to come to the Pierce-Braeburn office after hours — without James — and without Lucas knowing she's there. I then needed either a highly compelling reason for Margaret to kill Lucas on purpose or make it an accident. I went with the accidental death scenario: Margaret overhears a conversation that tips her off to serious trouble for James' business. After James dismisses her concerns, Margaret wakes up in the middle of the night haunted by the pending doom. She sneaks off half-cocked to clean out James' office, hoping to eliminate any evidence of his wrongdoing and save her family. When she is confronted by Lucas, however, the situation gets out of hand and he ends up dead, meeting with a captive bolt stunner that Margaret inadvertently received from her father.

In the original second draft, there were still too many problems with the death scene, sending me back to the message effort. The latest incarnation pushes Lucas' behavior farther, giving Margaret more justification for attacking him and then making it clearer (I hope!) that his death is an accident (Appendix F). After realizing she has killed Lucas, Margaret suffers a break. Something inside her dies and she goes on autopilot to clean up her own mess, as well as James'.

And thus begins the downward spiral that will unfold over the course of the series. This is a far cry from the first draft, in which Margaret comes off in one instructor's words as "an automaton who feels Terminator-like" in the Teaser.



## Chapter 5: Final Thoughts

I didn't come to this program with much in the way of screenwriting experience. I'd never taken a screenwriting course before. I learned what little I knew by reading every book on the subject available in my local library. I read whatever scripts I could find on the Internet Movie Script Database. I wrote an awful feature and paid an exorbitant sum of money that ate up most of my savings to get professional coverage. A lot of this information was conflicting. None of these writers could seem to agree and they all had a different approach, method, or technique they touted as "the best" or "the only." It was confusing, to say the least.

When I decided to try for grad school, I knew I'd have a hard road ahead of me — assuming I were to get in. I'd be starting behind everyone else in a lot of ways and mortgaging my entire future on a gamble that my brain could be re-programmed in the manner required for great screenwriting. *Great* screenwriting. I did not come here to do things halfway and two years was not a lot of time. As such, my expectations of myself were outrageously high. So I jumped in and got as much experience as possible, not just in screenwriting, but in directing, producing, and editing as well. I wanted to come out of this program with a full arsenal of career tools, and I believe I did.

The best part is that not only did all this experience round out my filmmaking skills, but every bit of it helped to make me a better screenwriter. I fully expected that Richard Lewis, Stuart Kelban, Cindy McCreery, and Beau Thorne would drill effective writing techniques into my head. I expected they would be hard on me, but that it would pay off in the end, and they did not disappoint. However, what I didn't realize at first was how taking Anne Lewis' editing class would discipline my approach to writing, or how Alex Smith's & Bryan Poyser's year-long Script-to-Screen Incubator would teach me

firsthand how a little flaw in the script becomes a huge problem on set or in the editing room, or how Charles Ramírez-Berg's History of Film course would establish a sense of my own writing's place in the evolution of cinematic arts. Furthermore, Geoff Marslett's Production Workshop for Writers taught me how to write a more produceable script; the Advanced Producing class — designed by Matthew McConaughey, implemented by Scott Rice, and featuring director Gary Ross — was chock-full of practical insight into the film business that every screenwriter should have; and Dr. James Cox's American Indian and Mexican-American Literature and Film course opened my eyes to new perspectives, exposing me to a wider source of inspiration for my own work.

Every step of this journey and every instructor who guided me on it have been invaluable. Maybe I took the long way around (okay, I certainly did), but the truth is I'm a hands-on, do-it-yourself, mess-it-up-a-million-ways-'til-you-finally-get-it-right kind of learner. I know that has been a great source of frustration for my screenwriting instructors, who were probably under the impression that I wasn't listening at all (I promise I was!). However, as frustrating as my process may be, what I realize now at the end of this program is that I just have to lean into it. It's who I am. It's how I'm wired. The good thing, though, is that while it will probably always be rather insane, I've become much more adept at navigating my creative journey, thanks to this program. It's a testament to the quality of the screenwriting faculty's guidance that I managed to accomplish anything at all. They've given me many tools with which to chisel away some of the chaos inherent in my process. Amongst other things, I will continue to benefit from Stuart Kelban's revision plan, Cindy McCreery's approach to mapping a pilot, and Richard Lewis' approach to a step outline. Perhaps the most unexpected tool, though, came from Beau Thorne's Adaptation course. I'd never considered doing adaptations

prior to seeing this class on our program of work, so it was a pleasant surprise how much I gained from the experience. Being afforded the opportunity to dabble in different genres, stories, and characters than I would otherwise think about was liberating and taught me a lot about myself as a writer. There was no pressure, no commitment to seeing the stories through to the end. The relief this simple fact provided was indescribable and quite telling. It became obvious that my biggest blockage to writing is the pressure I put on myself to “get it right” — those outrageously high expectations. As such, I will keep Beau’s assignments in mind when I hit a wall in the future. Just when I feel like I can’t stand writing anymore, when I think this is the last thing on Earth I was meant to do... I will find a short story and come up with a quick pitch for it just to get the fire burning again. My best moments in the program came when I threw worry out the window and wrote for the love of writing. This little exercise will help me continue doing that.

Another highlight of the program was discovering my love of television writing. When I wrote the Statement of Purpose for my application, I was focused solely on features and hadn’t considered television at all. Having worked on shows as a crew member, I’d already gotten a glimpse of what TV writers go through and wasn’t sure I could crank out scripts at that pace. After taking the Introduction to TV Writing class, however, my focus shifted completely and I spent the rest of the program zeroing in on one-hour television pilots. In Spring 2016, Cindy McCreery’s and Scott Shepherd’s Writers’ Room course confirmed something I had suspected all along — that I would love the collaborative atmosphere of a writer’s room. So, although it is still the greatest challenge for me, I believe television writing holds the greatest reward. Thus, I plan to continue focusing on one-hour dramas for the foreseeable future. This is the most dramatic shift the Radio-Television-Film MFA in Screenwriting has catalyzed in me.

I am deeply grateful to all my instructors for their patience and understanding over the last couple of years, and for their immense knowledge and expertise. Being accepted into this program and having this chance to develop my writing skills is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and I have done my best to take full advantage of my time here. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for allowing me to have this experience. I hope I'm able to represent the program in the best possible way with my future endeavors.

## **Appendices**

## APPENDIX A: ORIGINAL SHORT SCRIPT

EXT. SUBURBAN NEIGHBORHOOD - SUNSET

A young boy scooters up and down a row of cookie-cutter houses drenched in the orange glow of the setting sun.

The AGONIZED CRY of a little girl escapes one of the homes...

EXT. PIERCE HOME - CONTINUOUS

In the kitchen window, a perfectly coiffed head of short, blonde hair jounces with the efforts of its owner's labors over the sink as the girl's scream completes its course through the air.

The head belongs to MARGARET PIERCE, late 30s, and the shriek belongs to her daughter - ALYSSA, 8 years old.

ALYSSA (O.S.)

Leave me...

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

ALYSSA (O.S.)

...alone!

RUNNING WATER provides a peaceful accompaniment to Alyssa's protestations, while Margaret's hands furiously scrub at an already emaciated carrot.

Silent tears stream down Margaret's pinched face. She sets the scathed vegetable down next to a diced onion, taking a moment to review a print-out from [www.recipeworld.com](http://www.recipeworld.com) titled "How to Salvage a Ruined Roast."

Dressed in a red, silken blouse and pencil skirt, a distraught Margaret chops the carrot as her children continue their screaming match in the other room.

MARCUS (O.S.)

Those are mom's! Take 'em off!

ALYSSA (O.S.)

No!

Margaret ponders a Daddy Long Legs that is busily making its home in the window sill as she shaves burnt meat off a bone, then dumps it into a pot on the stove.

MARCUS (O.S.)

I mean it, Alyssa!

ALYSSA (O.S.)  
Mo-o-o-mmy!

Alyssa darts in, with the CLACKING sound of her mother's heels slipping off her feet and the RUSTLING of the necklaces she has piled on herself.

A near-perfect replica of Margaret, the eight-year-old cowers behind her mom as her pursuer enters the kitchen - MARCUS PIERCE, wise beyond his 13 years, carries himself like the man of the house.

MARCUS  
Come on, don't bug Mom while she's cooking.

Alyssa looks up at her mother in anticipation of a response that does not come.

Marcus guides the child out of the kitchen, glancing back at their mother, who stands stiffly at the counter.

With peace restored to the house, Margaret steps to the window and gazes out at the darkening world.

INT. KITCHEN - NIGHT

Alyssa holds fast to a dinner plate. Carefully inching toward the table, she sets it in place. Her task complete, she is admiring the set table with pride when a KEY TURNS in the front door. She instantly perks up.

Startled, Margaret brushes the bare bone into a garbage can and begins scouring her hands.

INT. FRONT DOOR - A MOMENT LATER

JAMES PIERCE, early 40s, enters with a weary gait and tired eyes that give the impression of a much older man. In his perfectly coordinated Brooks Brothers suit and trench coat, he has the look of a high-powered lawyer.

ALYSSA  
Daddy!

She dashes to her father, halting on her heels just in front of him.

ALYSSA (CONT'D)  
Welcome home, Daddy!

James forces a smile for his little girl as he sets down his briefcase and removes his coat, which Alyssa seizes upon and carries off.

He removes his suit jacket, tightens his tie, and glances at the kitchen just in time to catch Margaret emptying a glass of red wine into her mouth.

INT. DINING ROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT

RED WINE FLOWS INTO A CRYSTAL GLASS.

The family sits at the dinner table, hands joined, forming a perfect cross with their positions.

JAMES

Dear Lord, thank you for this food.

With a blank stare, Margaret bears the remembered images that taunt her mind: SLICING THE MEAT.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Bless the hands that prepared it.

SCRUBBING HER HANDS IN THE SINK.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Bless it to our use and us to your service. Through Christ our Lord, we pray.

FAMILY

Amen.

Alyssa mouses at her bowl.

ALYSSA

What's this?

Margaret peers at the spoon that Alyssa dips in and out of the soup, letting chunks plop haphazardly back into the goop.

MARGARET

It's called stew, honey.

ALYSSA

How come Adelita doesn't cook for us anymore?

Margaret snaps her gaze back to her own plate.



MARGARET  
 She had to go away for a while,  
 remember?  
 (off Alyssa's persistent  
 pout)  
 Eat your salad.

INT. DINING ROOM - LATER

SILENCE. Only the occasional FORK SCRAPE and the SOUND OF CHEWING is heard.

Alyssa looks around the table, waiting for someone to speak.

ALYSSA  
 I got an "A" on my social studies  
 test.

Silence.

Margaret finally looks up from her salad plate.

MARGARET  
 That's wonderful, sweetheart.

ALYSSA  
 I know all the continents and the  
 states.

Silence.

ALYSSA (CONT'D)  
 I got the highest grade in the  
 class! Even Missy Harding didn't  
 get as high as me! She misspelled  
 California. She left out an "i"...  
 she was so upse-

MARCUS  
 Would you shut up? Nobody cares.

JAMES  
 Hey!

Marcus looks back down at his "stew".

ALYSSA  
 How was your day, Daddy?

Marcus eyes his sister, willing her to be quiet.

JAMES  
 It was fine, Princess.

Margaret looks up at him for the first time - a questioning gaze. Marcus fixates on his food as if willing himself not to hear.

JAMES (CONT'D)  
We're tearing through the  
prosecution's case. They don't  
have a leg to stand on.

Margaret swallows hard.

MARGARET  
Well... that's good. You really  
need some rest.

Takes a sip of wine.

JAMES  
It'll be over soon.

ALYSSA  
And then we'll go to Mickeyland?

MARCUS  
Don't be such a baby.

ALYSSA  
I'm not!

MARCUS  
We can't go to Mickeyland.

ALYSSA  
But Dad said...

MARCUS  
He only said that to shut you up.

James punches the table, eyes shut tight. Margaret clutches her wine glass. James opens his eyes and throws a cautioning glance at Marcus.

JAMES  
(to Alyssa)  
We can go to Mickeyland for spring  
break.

ALYSSA  
When the trial's over?

JAMES  
When the trial's over.

Alyssa smiles, then sticks out her tongue to Marcus, who rolls his eyes.

Margaret gulps her wine.

Marcus picks at his dinner. He slips a bite into his mouth, then makes a face. Detecting an offensive material amongst the half-masticated spoonful of soup, he seeks to extract it with his fingers.

ALYSSA

Ee-ee-ew! Is that a hair?

Margaret watches in horror as the long hair stretches further and further out of her son's mouth.

Marcus examines the freed hair, then regards his mother's short blonde hair.

MARGARET

Well, throw it away.

Marcus obeys.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

(to James)

Did you get a hold of your assistant?

James nods. Marcus returns to the table.

JAMES

(pensively)

She'll be served tomorrow.

ALYSSA

What's "served"?

MARCUS

It means she has to go to court, stupid.

ALYSSA

You're stupid!

JAMES

Knock it off, you two.

INT. DINING ROOM - LATER

The family sits amongst their half-eaten dinners - only Alyssa has finished hers.

INT. KITCHEN - LATER

Margaret rinses and stacks her dishes neatly on the counter.

INT. DINING ROOM - A MOMENT LATER

James rises from the table.

JAMES  
 Marcus, rinse. Lyssie, load.  
 Don't forget to wipe the table.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

James joins his wife. Margaret leans into him as if begging to collapse.

Eyeing his parents suspiciously, Marcus deposits his own dishes into the sink. With the CLINKING of ceramic against metal bringing their tender moment to an end, James leads his wife out of the room.

Margaret reaches out to comfort Marcus on her way out, kissing the top of his head.

MARGARET  
 (whispering)  
 You're a good boy.

Not to be outdone, Alyssa runs to hug her mother.

ALYSSA  
 Am I a good girl, Mommy?

MARGARET  
 Yes, sweetheart. Now, help your brother clear the table. He's in charge right now, so do what he says, okay?

ALYSSA  
 Okay.

INT. GARAGE - MOMENTS LATER

Margaret opens the door to find James struggling with something in the back of their minivan.

MARGARET  
 I think Marcus knows something.

She walks over to the van.

MARGARET (CONT'D)  
Did you hear me?

JAMES  
Don't worry, he'd never guess. Can  
you help me with this?

Margaret reaches in to help extricate the object.

MARGARET  
Wait, I think it's caught on  
something.

They struggle to get it out and set it on the garage floor.

All the tension of the evening is released in their shared  
smile.

MARGARET (CONT'D)  
Oh honey, it's perfect.

JAMES  
You think he'll like it?

MARGARET  
Definitely.

They look down at the object - an expensive new bicycle.

MARGARET (CONT'D)  
Thank you.

She seals her gratitude with a kiss.

Heading back into the house, James clicks off the light.

MARGARET (CONT'D)  
Oh, I almost forgot.

She switches the light back on, fishing a single key from her  
pocket as she walks over to a pad-locked deep freezer.

She lifts the lid, releasing steam.

Inserting her entire upper body, she searches for her heart's  
desire, eventually plucking a foil-wrapped ball from the  
depths of the freezer.

She holds it up for James to see, revealing the contents of the freezer: On top of several foiled balls rests the warm body of a young, professionally dressed woman - JAMES' ASSISTANT, mid-20s, with delicate features and an expression of resigned sadness frozen in her dead eyes.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

For tomorrow.

JAMES

This is the last one. It's almost over.

Margaret closes the freezer and carefully snaps the padlock back into place.

The light clicks off once again as Margaret rejoins her husband.

JAMES (CONT'D)

They can't convict me without her.

Coalesced in silhouette, they re-enter the house and shut the door.

**THE END.**

## **APPENDIX B: ORIGINAL PILOT BIBLE**

### **PILOT BIBLE** *MOTHER OF INVENTION*

**LOGLINE:** After a mysterious girl covered in human bite marks disappears from police custody, Detective Tandy Martin is led to investigate a family of cannibals who seem to possess supernatural powers.

**FORMAT:** Hour-long serialized supernatural procedural

**AUDIENCE:** 18-49 year olds — both male and female, though particularly drawing in a female audience with the female protagonist. Likely crossover with fans of Hannibal, Sleepy Hollow, The Killing, Grimm, The X Files, and other supernatural procedurals.

**TONE:** The tone is dark, ominous, and mysterious, at times reaching into creepy thriller territory. The subject matter, aesthetic, and overall feel is similar to Hannibal and Sleepy Hollow. It is serialized and paced like The Killing, where one investigation spans multiple seasons. It is also similar to The X Files in that the primary investigation leads to a much wider investigation that carries us beyond the first couple seasons.

#### **THE WORLD:**

The show takes place in the present day, beginning in rural Oregon & taking us to suburban Detroit, Michigan, with possibility of other US and perhaps even worldwide locations as the investigation unfolds (following the Pierces' trail and then investigating the cult).

The main hook is the seemingly ordinary upper middle class family who have become cannibals. We are led to wonder how and why they came to stumble down this disturbing path. The other distinctive feature of this show is the

supernatural cult at the center of the investigation, which possesses people to become cannibals.

In terms of setting, it can at times be considered a character in that the supernatural elements are intensified by it — especially in the case of the opening scene in rural Oregon. The misty pine forest sets the ominous tone of the show right off the bat.

### **CHARACTERS IN THE SERIES:**

Detective Tandy Martin: The youngest female special agent in FBI history, 28-year-old

Det. Martin has a dark secret in her past that not even the thorough vetting of her employer was able to uncover. Her twin sister (fraternal) disappeared from their shared bedroom when she was 10 years old. This is no secret. In fact, it's one of the reasons she is assigned to cold cases. However, what Martin never told anyone is that before her sister disappeared, human bite marks mysteriously appeared all over her body and young Tandy caught a glimpse of a terrifying apparition — a small, gaunt man covered in ash and wearing a human skull as a hat. Martin spent the next two years of her life mute and plagued by night terrors, but made a silent determination that she would find her sister's kidnappers someday. When Alyssa Pierce turns up with the same eerie bite marks, Martin sees her chance. We root for Det. Martin because she is all heart and genuinely wants to help Alyssa, as well as get some answers about her sister's disappearance and even about her own sanity. She dives into the investigation without much thought to the consequences or her own personal safety, such is the totality of her devotion. Her drive, tenacity, and singularity of purpose endear her to the audience.

The Pierce Family: They were a typical upper crust family until the father was indicted



for mortgage fraud and resorted to killing anyone who might testify against him. In a desperate effort to cover up his crimes and protect her family, their home, and their wealthy lifestyle, the wife decided it was time to fire their housekeeper/cook and serve up her own meals — of her husband's victims. In doing so, however, she irreversibly altered the family fate by conjuring up a supernatural force that will not allow them to escape the twisted cycle. Over time, this force possesses the family more and more each day until they are finally transformed into unwitting pawns for a worldwide supernatural cult that aims to consume all of humanity one-by-one — taking the “sins” of the flesh with it.

The Cult: Begun by a splinter group of Aghori cannibals from India, the group has spread to become a worldwide underground network of living and non-living souls. Their ultimate goal is to literally consume what they see as the world of illusion. Believing there is no right or wrong — only pure or impure — they seek to absorb and purify all of humanity, its flaws, and its virtues.

### **THEMES AND CONCEPTS:**

*Mother of Invention* is show about family, survival, and animal instincts that explores the darkest depths of the human psyche, suggesting it has a power to conjure supernatural forces in our darkest moments. It also explores the ugliness of human greed and American consumerism, and plays with an underlying theme of consumption.

### **FORMULA - WEEK TO WEEK**

Each week, Det. Martin will step deeper into the web of lies and confusion surrounding the Pierce family, discovering that they have not only become cannibals, but in doing so, inexorably linked themselves to a supernatural cult that possesses them more and more each day. This discovery leads to a much wider investigation of the cult, which turns out to be a worldwide network. Martin will face more and more conflict between the expectations of her job and her personal need to pursue this case.

## **SEASON ARC:**

The primary arc for each season will focus on a major twist, break, or development in Det. Martin's investigation.

Season one will be focused on finding Alyssa Pierce and learning more about her family history along the way while Det. Martin's boss begins to lose faith in her due to her obsession with this missing person case. We will also learn about Martin's past and why she is so obsessed with finding Alyssa.

In the second season, we will meet the Pierce family and learn more about their transition process from white picket life to murdering cannibals.

Third season will widen the investigation to the cult.

## **EPISODE IDEAS:**

- Det. Martin flies to Detroit to investigate the Pierce family. Being back in her hometown, she is forced to confront her own past.
- Haunted more and more by the ghostly apparition, Det. Martin seeks alternative approaches to her investigative problem. She secretly goes to a psychic medium for help and finds an unexpected partner in crime.
- Meet the Pierce family: James, Margaret, Marcus, and Alyssa. We see flashbacks of their former life - a carefree existence of nannies, private schools, country clubs, and being tended to by their housekeeper/cook. Juxtapose that with their current reality of life on the run, living out of a suitcase in cheap hotels as their lifetime of accumulated wealth dwindles as fast as their need for human flesh rises.

## **PILOT:**

This premise pilot that opens on Alyssa Pierce running barefoot from a thick, mist- covered pine forest into a small police station in rural Oregon. We then cut to the normal world of our protagonist, Det. Martin, enduring a typical boring day of wading through case files in the FBI field office in Portland. She seems like a normal, relatively happy woman who fits in well with her co-workers, laughing and joking along with the guys. This all changes when she gets the call to head out to the boonies to investigate an interstate kidnapping. Upon hearing that the girl is covered in what look to be human bite marks, she bursts out the door and heads straight to the police station.

## APPENDIX C: FIRST PILOT TREATMENT

**LOGLINE:** The mother of a seemingly normal, albeit wealthy family resorts to cannibalism in order to cover up her husband's white collar crime and keep him out of prison.

**TEASER:** Margaret stares down a large, locked cabinet in the garage. Gathers her courage. Puts the key in the lock. Opens the door to... A head staring back at her.

**TITLES:** 12 Hours Earlier...

**ACT ONE:** A stressed out Margaret watches James slowly work his way into a Brooks Brothers suit: *What should I tell the kids? What will we do for money? What if we lose the house?* James reassures her everything will be fine and that it's just a grand jury — he'll be home at the end of the day just like any other work day. Margaret goes to the kitchen where Adelita is readying breakfast. She's shocked to see the lady of the house at this hour. Marcus is indifferent to his mother's presence, but Alyssa is excited at this rare treat. She talks her mother's ear off over breakfast and Margaret seems exhausted just listening to her. James leaves for "work" as if everything is normal. Adelita & the kids leave. Margaret goes to court, against James' instructions. She gets there right after the indictment has come down - just in time to hear the judge order James to be held without bail in light of the fact that his partners have already skipped town. **The bailiff takes him into custody.**

**ACT TWO:** Stunned, Margaret stands in the middle of the courtroom watching James get hauled away in handcuffs. The prosecutor, Tandy Martin, turns to one of James' attorneys and assures him the investigation will be swift, thorough, and relentless. Margaret overhears this. With no instructions from James and in total shock, Margaret has no idea what to do with herself. She goes home and sits in her empty, too quiet house. Adelita finds out about the indictment at the grocery store from another nanny and is convinced that Margaret will kill herself. She tries to check out, but the Pierces' credit card is declined. She rushes back to her employers' home.

Adelita tells Margaret about the credit card being declined. Margaret calls the credit card company and discovers that the assets are seized. An investigator shows up on their doorstep with a warrant. Ransacks the house. Freaking out, Adelita tries to clean up after them as they go through the house. Margaret stares blankly at the floor. Adelita yells at her to do something. No response. Adelita calls her husband. He tells her there's no way she'll be getting paid and to just *forget about those rich assholes and leave.*

**Adelita quits.**

**ACT THREE:** Margaret visits James in his temporary holding cell at the courthouse [Not sure if this is realistic, must research. I need him to be close, though. If he's in jail, she

wouldn't be able to visit him yet]. She tells him about the search and the shopping attempt. He reacts with an irrational amount of concern about the search as Margaret rambles on about her worries that Adelita will quit if this is what working for them is going to be like now. James asks if the investigators searched the garage. They did. He starts to lose his calm facade. James tells her she has to "get ahold of his partners." It's vital to keeping him out of prison and restoring their normal life. Directs her to a locked cabinet in the garage...

**Margaret discovers the bodies in the garage. [We don't see them this time, just her freak out]**

**ACT FOUR:** Margaret gets home, fully expecting her kids to be there. They're not. It's 5 o'clock. She takes the opportunity to figure something out for dinner. She rummages through the refrigerator — there's not much since Adelita couldn't do the shopping. She finds one chunk of meat — a roast. Looks for recipes online. Finds one: Roast should be thawed, then cooked in a casserole dish with veggies and broth at 400 degrees... For 3 hours! Oi. She throws the chunk on a cookie sheet, turns the oven on 500 and shoves it in. Her phone rings. It's Marcus... *Where's Adelita?* Oops.

**She leaves her roast in the oven and goes to pick them up.**

**ACT FIVE:** Margaret faces a barrage of questions the whole way home. Questions she has no answers for — or at least no pleasant ones. They come home to a house filled with smoke and firemen. One of them presents her with the roast and a fine for the false alarm. Margaret looks like she's ready to give up, sinks down to the floor as the firemen let themselves out. The kids just stand there staring at her for a moment, then Marcus says he'll order them a pizza. Margaret leaps up — *No!* Margaret says she's going to cook. The kids don't know whether to laugh or cry. *But the fridge is empty...*

Margaret goes out to the garage, props a chair under the door to prevent anyone from opening it. We're back where we started: Margaret staring down the cabinet in the garage, gathering her courage.

She chops up the body, gagging the whole time. She breaks a nail. Ugh. Marcus turns the door handle. Can't open it. Calls for his mom, asks what's going on. *Nothing honey, go do your homework...*

Margaret serves up a hearty soup. The kids seem dubious as they dip their spoons in. Margaret gulps a glass of wine. **Their verdict comes down... *Not bad!***

**TAG:** Margaret tucks Alyssa into bed. *I love you, Mommy.* Marcus waits for her in the hallway outside Alyssa's room. He has a million questions, but doesn't bother to ask. He just thanks her for dinner. Margaret tears up as he disappears into his room.

**She walks out to the pool, kicks her shoes off, then lets herself drop in...**

## APPENDIX D: ORIGINAL TEASER

INT. PIERCE-BRAEBURN SECURITIES - NIGHT

A dark and narrow hallway in a labrynthian modern office building widens into a small mouth containing an elevator.

The ELEVATOR DINGS. Door opens, revealing:

A WOMAN'S DOWN-TURNED HEAD. Blonde hair tucked into a perfectly tight bun, her narrow shoulders clothed in red silk.

She lifts her head upon the opening of the door, showing her face: Late 30s, a perky kind of pretty, perfect skin, save for a few stubborn wrinkles here and there. This is MARGARET PIERCE (NÉ ANDERSON).

She draws in a deep breath of worry as she looks down the long hallway, illuminated only by safety lights.

Closes her eyes. Hears MEN'S MUFFLED VOICES FROM A DISTANCE, they CARRY OVER TO...

INT. MARGARET'S CHILDHOOD HOME - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

TEN-YEAR-OLD MARGARET sleeps soundly. The MEN'S VOICES GROW LOUDER, ARGUING.

*Little Margaret opens her eyes.*

INT. PIERCE-BRAEBURN SECURITIES - NIGHT (BACK IN PRESENT)

Margaret opens her eyes with newfound courage and determination.

Steps a perfect high-heeled foot out of the elevator and makes her way through the darkness.

EXT. MARGARET'S CHILDHOOD HOME - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

*In a nightgown and flip-flops, little Margaret follows the MEN'S VOICES, now at their apex and accompanied by COWS MOOING in the darkness. She heads toward a large building with metal siding and cows penned up alongside it. A fretful look to the cows, who seem to look right through her soul. Freaks her out.*

*Continues toward the building. Stops short of the pen, tiny next to the bovine giants. She listens. A STRUGGLE INSIDE.*

*The VOICES SUDDENLY QUIET. She opens the door...*

INT. PIERCE-BRAEBURN SECURITIES - NIGHT (BACK IN PRESENT)

Margaret turns down another dark hall, a single office lit up at the other end.

Growing more determined with each heavy step...

INT. ANDERSON SLAUGHTERHOUSE - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

*Little Margaret gingerly closes the metal door behind her, though she is powerless over the LOUD CREAKING SOUND it makes.*

*THE SOUND OF SOMETHING HEAVY BEING DRAGGED AGAINST CONCRETE.*

*The girl steps gently against the bloody concrete floor, amid a graveyard of hanging carcasses stripped of their flesh...*

INT. PIERCE-BRAEBURN SECURITIES - NIGHT (BACK IN PRESENT)

Margaret has reached the bright office amid the darkness, the door ajar.

INT. PIERCE-BRAEBURN SECURITIES - BRAEBURN'S OFFICE - NIGHT

It's a large, luxurious corner office. There's a leather couch and chair near the door - an office with its own living room.

She peers in at a MAN inside. Seated at a stately desk. Mid-forties, a bit of salt in his pepper hair, sharp dresser, Handsome. Dignified. His name is LUCAS BRAEBURN.

He picks up his phone.

Margaret watches.

He doesn't notice.

INT. ANDERSON SLAUGHTERHOUSE - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

*Little Margaret approaches a work light deep in the slaughterhouse, her innocent face becoming more illuminated the closer she gets.*

*She stops. Looks down. Her flip-flop stuck in a puddle of coagulated blood. It's deep. The junk has reached her tiny toes.*

*She works her foot back into the straps.*

A MAN'S PANICKED VOICE...

LEE (O.C.)  
Margaret? What...

His VOICE CARRIES OVER TO...

INT. PIERCE-BRAEBURN SECURITIES - BRAEBURN'S OFFICE - NIGHT  
(BACK IN PRESENT)

LEE'S VOICE BLENDS WITH:

LUCAS  
Margaret?

Margaret has stepped into the light.

She forces a smile.

Lucas seems disconcerted.

LUCAS  
(into his phone)  
Uh, let me call you back... Yeah.

He hangs up, re-focuses his attention on Margaret.

LUCAS  
What are you doing here?

MARGARET  
I was looking for James.

Much as she tries to act natural, Lucas clearly notices there's something off about her.

LUCAS  
He left hours ago.

MARGARET  
Oh.

Behind her, Margaret clutches a large baton-like object with four distinct sections textured like a pistol grip, roughly nine inches long. It's a CAPTIVE BOLT STUNNER.

MARGARET  
What are you doing here so late?

LUCAS  
Working. Look, Margaret-

She gets flushed, suddenly bashful.



MARGARET  
I was thinking... About what you  
said.

They meet each other's gaze.

MARGARET  
That night. After you...

He's flushed now, too. And a bit breathless.

LUCAS  
Yeah. I remember.

Pregnant pause.

LUCAS  
Thought you said you were looking  
for James.

A shy, endearing smile. Nervous laugh. Perfectly timed.

MARGARET  
I didn't know what to say.

He moves toward her. She takes a deep breath.

He kisses her neck. She enjoys the moment.

He lifts his hands to her face. She lifts her arms to return  
his embrace.

He STIFFENS. CONVULSES. IN SHOCK.

His WILD EYES regard Margaret - his secret crush. His end.

She FLASHES BACK to the BOVINE EYES OF HER CHILDHOOD MEMORY.

She RETRACTS THE STUNNER from his back.

He FALLS TO THE GROUND.

She calmly switches the stunner to "Off."

Lifts her head back up to stare straight ahead. The lines on  
her face looking a little deeper, her skin a little less  
perfect.

Her eyes coolly resigned to the fate she has just made for  
herself.

TITLES: "Mother of Invention"

## **APPENDIX E: FIRST DRAFT FEEDBACK**

### **1st Evaluation**

#### **Strengths:**

What the script has going for it most is its consistent tone, its pacing, and its quality character work. Despite the fact the material leaves much to be desired in terms of its world-building (more on this below), that's not to take away from the quality of the slow conveying of Margaret's dark side. Also, it is worth noting the quality of story's dialogue and prose, and the fluid nature of the read makes for quite the page-turner. All said, the pilot script checks many of the boxes required of quality crime dramas, but some additional consideration should be given to the narrative wrinkles as dictated below, as currently these issues detract from the viability of the series.

#### **Weaknesses:**

The biggest issue with the script is that one fails to get a sense of story differentiation, as would effect future episodes in the series. Though the pilot script does a well enough job introducing the characters in play and the circumstances that lead to Margaret being reduced to her more primal / killer ways, the pilot fails to indicate the "bigger world" in play – which makes the series seem very limited. For example: consider the television series "Dexter": though the pilot episode eases one into Dexter's life, it also shows how his personal life intersects with his professional life as a cop, which hints at the idea that future criminals will succumb to his blade. As is, in "Mother of Invention," the narrative seems so focused on showing Margaret and her family life that one fails to get a sense of the larger world in play.

#### **TV series potential:**

Despite the well-written nature of the material, as is, the project faces a steep uphill battle in terms of being produced, given that the concept seems very limiting – i.e. once the wife goes and kills all those she considers potential witnesses, where does the story go from here? It also remains to be seen how her husband's incarceration is to be kept "fresh" from a reader's perspective. Though the bible answers some of these questions, currently, its barebones nature further proves the limited nature of this concept.

#### **General Thoughts on Bible:**

Though the series bible contains all the necessary elements, it suffers from the fact its information is overly condensed, which further highlights the limited nature of the series. For example, rather than keeping things short and sweet, one

should further increase and further elaborate on the episodes to potentially be included throughout the remainder of a first season. Also, overviews of future seasons should also be provided for the sake of clearly indicating that the writer has a sense of story direction.

## **2nd Evaluation**

### **Strengths:**

The pilot's opening is very strong. The cross-cutting between Margaret's memories of the slaughterhouse and her interaction with Lucas builds a lot of intrigue. Who is this woman? Why is she doing this? This pulls the audience in. The story really heats up after Margaret leaves her father's house. It becomes apparent just how much trouble she is in. There is a ton of conflict, both internal and external. The reveal that Lucas knew nothing is devastating and wickedly enjoyable. By the end of the script Margaret has emerged as a deeply compelling character. Her nonchalance while committing unspeakable horrors is a fairly solid hook to entice audiences to watch future episodes.

### **Weaknesses:**

While the writer betrays little about the characters or circumstances in the first several pages, allowing the audience to build their understanding as the opening sequence progresses, this technique continues for far too long. It's not at all clear who these characters are, what their motivations are, their flaws, goals, etc. It's not at all clear what this TV show is for dozens of pages. This is a major problem since TV shows have to capture the audience immediately. The story becomes much stronger after Margaret leaves her father's house because there's a sudden sense of urgency to everything, a sense of the consequences. While the show ends strongly, it's not enough to prop up the sagging middle. The characters need more personality. While it makes sense to keep Margaret a mystery – it's far more intriguing to ask how a docile suburban housewife could not only murder, but do so in such a vicious manner – the other characters lack personality. This is particularly true of Margaret's husband.

### **TV series potential:**

There is some interesting material in *Mother of Invention* but the script doesn't yet fully work. A rewrite would be necessary to warrant further consideration. Margaret is a deeply compelling character but the script has plotting and character issues that undermine this. The pilot also doesn't do a great job of setting up the series. Beyond Margaret's next task at hand – locating the cleaner – it's not at all clear where this series is going. That is largely due to the character issues. Without clear motivations, goals and flaws for the major characters they feel directionless and, by proxy, so does the script. The exceedingly dark tone will

likely scare off many potential suitors as the audience will likely be niche. However, for cablers that cater to such fare – notably AMC or FX – this feels like a solid fit. First, the script must be improved, however.

### **General Thoughts on Bible:**

The bible illuminates much that is missing in the pilot. The character bios are deeply helpful – especially Margaret's lengthy bio – but they reveal just how little of this information is provided in the script. Obviously, providing a character's entire backstory is unnecessary but it's not at all clear, for instance, that Margaret is a tried-and-true Republican or that her husband is actually guilty of the crimes he's accused of. The descriptions of future episodes could – and should – be expanded. They show a very a decent progression in storytelling, though the cleaner storyline develops slowly. Overall, the bible helps in the series' presentation but it could be expanded to include more information about the other characters as well as providing a more detailed road map for future episodes.

### **3rd Evaluation**

We don't get a grasp on what the story is about. A clearly psychotic killer murders everyone in the path of her husband's indictment on some unknown white collar crime. Other than this crazed sociopath trying to carry on normalcy in her family life while she's either coming from or going to a murder, we don't get the concept of the script. We don't get any take-away messages out of this other than stay clear of Margaret. As a TV one-hour pilot, it also is limited in longevity as a series as this woman's arrest is clearly imminent having killed in a bold way a series of people all connected to her husband's indictment. It needs a direction, a moral, a "raison d'être."

## APPENDIX F: FINAL VERSION OF LUCAS' DEATH

### ACT FOUR

INT. PIERCE-BRAEBURN - JAMES' OFFICE - NIGHT (PRESENT)

Back to Lucas and Margaret in the present - Lucas locking the door.

MARGARET

Lucas, I don't know what you think-

The finger on her lips.

LUCAS

Don't.

Her assessing his intentions, reaching for something - her purse? The letter opener on the desk?

LUCAS (CONT'D)

What are you really doing here, Margaret?

MARGARET

What do you mean?

LUCAS

Did James send you?

MARGARET

I came to get his-

LUCAS

Charger, right.

A long pause. Staring each other down. He pushes her hair out of her face.

LUCAS (CONT'D)

God, you're beautiful. I wanted to kiss you the moment I first saw you-

MARGARET

I know everything, Lucas.

LUCAS

Remember that? It was rush week. Your sisters were torturing the hopefuls. You thought no one saw you sneak away, but-

MARGARET

Did you hear me? James told me everything.

LUCAS  
I caught you. Remember?

MARGARET  
I remember. You were drunk and  
wouldn't let me pass. I tried to  
get away. That's when James came  
along and-

He kisses her. She pushes him away.

MARGARET (CONT'D)  
Stop.

He pulls her to him - with force.

MARGARET (CONT'D)  
Stop, Lucas!

She struggles against his grip, knocking her purse over as  
she breaks free.

Margaret bends down to pick it up, Lucas takes the  
opportunity to grab her from behind.

She spots something rolling out of her purse, surprised to  
see-

Lee's CAPTIVE BOLT STUNNER. She'd forgotten about it.

She struggles to reach it, fighting him off over the next  
exchange:

LUCAS  
So you and James just thought you'd  
walk away from this?

MARGARET  
You're the one running away! I  
heard you and Karen! You're gonna  
leave James holding the bag!

He yanks her around so she's facing him and pins her down.

LUCAS  
Bullshit. James has been running  
this company into the ground... I  
bet you've been in on it the whole  
time. Just playing cute and sweet  
so no one would notice you and  
James were robbing them blind.

MARGARET  
I'm not the CFO! All he wanted to  
do is help his mentor.

LUCAS  
He didn't want to help Harry, he  
wanted to be him. And guess what?  
He is!

She wriggles free, lunging for the stunner.

LUCAS (CONT'D)  
He'll hang you out to dry just like  
he did the rest of us.

He grabs and yanks her toward him. She whips her arm around,  
reaching behind his back.

A FLASH: *Blood. Cow flesh. Human flesh.*

MARGARET  
He's everything.

He STIFFENS. CONVULSES.

His WILD EYES regard Margaret.

Another FLASH: *The bovine eyes of her childhood memory.*

In her hand is the CAPTIVE BOLT STUNNER from Lee's freezer.

She retracts it from the back of Lucas' neck.

He COLLAPSES ONTO HER.

She drops the stunner.

Relieved.

She wiggles out from under him. Gets to her knees.

MARGARET (CONT'D)  
Lucas?

Shakes him. Nothing.

The back of his neck is purple where the stunner blasted him.  
She starts to panic.

MARGARET (CONT'D)  
Lucas?!

Feels his pulse.

Shock. Tears. Crumbling. Then-

*INT. SLAUGHTERHOUSE - NIGHT (FLASHBACK)*

*A surprised Lee stands over Margaret, who has just walked in on him in the slaughterhouse. His eyes kind, worried.*

*LEE*  
*Margaret? What're you doin' outta*  
*bed, sugar bear?*

*LITTLE MARGARET*  
*I heard noises.*

*He blocks her path, preventing her from seeing much behind him. Nevertheless, she catches a glimpse -*

*Of a man's bloody arm.*

*LITTLE MARGARET (CONT'D)*  
*Who's that man, Daddy?*

...

*LEE*  
*He's... a friend.*

*LITTLE MARGARET*  
*What happened to him?*

*LEE*  
*He had an accident.*

*LITTLE MARGARET*  
*Should I call 9-1-1?*

*LEE*  
*He just needs a nap is all.*

*Little Margaret approaches the body... The lower half is lodged in the crusher.*

*Margaret's SCREAM carries over to -*

*INT. PIERCE HOME - KITCHEN - O'DARK THIRTY*

*Margaret. Mindless. Staring out the kitchen window as she chops tomatoes.*

FLASHES OF: *Blood. Cows. The slaughterhouse. Lucas.*

*LITTLE FEET PATTERNING.*



## APPENDIX G: CURRENT PILOT BIBLE

### PILOT BIBLE

#### *MOTHER OF INVENTION*

**LOGLINE:** The mother of a seemingly normal, albeit wealthy family resorts to cannibalism in order to cover up her husband's commission of securities fraud.

**FORMAT:** Hour-long

**AUDIENCE:** 18-49 year olds — both male and female, though particularly drawing in a female audience with the female protagonist. Possible crossover with fans of Dexter.

**TONE:** Dark, gritty, real.

### THE WORLD

Present Day. Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. One of the richest towns in the U.S... And less than 25 miles from one of the poorest cities in the U.S. — Detroit. Opulence amid detritus. Affluence amid poverty. Every bubble has burst, crowning the Bernie Madoffs of the world king and the casting the desperate masses as their peasants, begging for scraps of the American dream.

### CHARACTERS IN THE SERIES

#### *PRIMARY*



MARGARET PIERCE (NÉE ANDERSON): 39. A kind but wounded soul, Margaret gives the impression of being delicate and cares too much what others think of her. Tougher than she looks with a fiercely protective streak and a resourcefulness that her current lifestyle does not require. She does her best to blend in with the country club crowd and mask her “low class” roots, lest she embarrass herself and James. Deep down, though, she’ll always be that country girl from Ohio who grew up hunting, fishing, and slaughtering with her father. What no one knows is the trauma she holds within, having caught her dad grinding up a dead human body one night. Margaret has carried his secret all these years, the rift between them growing deeper and deeper over time until she finally went

off to college. This is where she met James. He swept her off her feet with tales of worldly travels and family money, which he shunned in favor of making his own way in the world. Little did she know it was all a smoke screen, even then. Despite the fact that she and James can well afford all the hired help they could want, she prides herself on caring for her family and especially loves cooking for them.



JAMES PIERCE: 41. CEO/CIO of Pierce-Braeburn Securities. James tells people that he inherited his father's investment business in his early 20s, but the truth is that his father died a pauper, alcoholic, and itinerant gambler that left him and his mother nothing when he died— when James was in his freshman year of college. He'd won a full ride to U of M thanks to his stellar grades, but the death took its toll and James struggled after that. He did his best to take care of his mother and dreamed of buying her a mansion someday, but she committed suicide before he finished school.

He barely skated through college where he studied finance and entrepreneurship (in between frat parties and wooing Margaret). He never had the time or patience to apply himself to legitimately running the business, though. He was always looking for a short-cut to wealth and found it in the form of various fraudulent investment schemes akin to the one that led to S.A. Martin's family home being foreclosed on. Given what happened to poor Bernie Madoff, James is extremely paranoid and nervous about his fate.



S.A. TANDY MARTIN: 46. Her father died of a heart attack last year, collapsing right over his pile of bills — including back taxes on a house he no longer owned. Her parents went bankrupt and lost their home five years ago due to a Madoff-like scheme and they never recovered mentally, physically, or emotionally. When her father passed away, her mother's senility worsened. Tandy blames it all on the stress of losing their home and retirement savings and still gets deeply angry whenever she thinks about it. Now she has returned to her home town of Detroit after following a paper trail of fraud to Pierce-Braeburn. The middle child of three kids,

it's a source of frustration that she's the only one willing to deal with the reality of an aging parent, but then again she's also the only one who's still single.



LEE ANDERSON: 65. Margaret's father. Motto: "We're all just animals. Nobody's better than anybody else." Cantankerous and set in his rough, country ways. He's brusque and stoic. Has a big heart, a bad temper, and a serious soft spot for his girls. He's still not too sure about that fancy-schmancy James guy and doesn't like how spoiled Margaret has become, but James has taken good care of his girl, so he doesn't say much about it. Always did think he seemed a bit shifty, though... He gets enraged when thinking about how much the rich get away with and how the 1%-ers have sold this country out from underneath the folks on whose backs it was built. He considers himself a good Christian man,

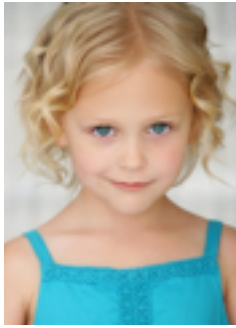
despite some missteps here and there, and is a tireless fighter for the underdog. He had a bit of trouble some years back with a neighbor who ended up disappearing. People in town said Lee had something to do with it and one-by-one, the local farmers stopped bringing him their livestock. His slaughterhouse business never quite recovered, though he still plugs away with his acre of corn. For the most part, though, he and his wife are living off the good graces of his disability checks and government subsidies, which is a sore spot. What the townspeople don't know is how right they were. That neighbor disappeared into Lee's meat grinder after a fight one night — the very same that little Margaret witnessed.

## ***SECONDARY***



CAMERON PIERCE: 13. Cameron is a typical thirteen-year-old. An average student with above average looks and popularity, he got his first girlfriend last year and is on the verge of his first heartbreak, unbeknownst to his parents. Like most kids in his demographic, he has led an extremely over-scheduled existence — soccer, piano, football, debate team, you-name-it, but unlike most other kids in his school, he was not raised by nannies. Sure, his family has a "nanny," but that's mostly for show. Adelita really just does light cleaning and takes the kids to school. Margaret is very involved in her kids' lives, which is an occasional source of ridicule amongst

his friends (but only because they're jealous). All in all, he's a good kid, even if a bit moody at times. He tends to be a little more sensitive than his peers, but he has already learned to keep this to himself. So it's anyone's guess how he'll handle the trauma of James' arrest and trial.



ALYSSA PIERCE: 8. Rambunctious and bratty, but smart as a whip. Always gets her way. Enjoys torturing Cameron and being the center of attention. Loves being involved in a variety of activities — ballet, soccer, violin lessons, etc. Despite being a bit spoiled, she has a strong bond with both her mother and Adelita, who is teaching her Spanish.



PEGGY ANDERSON, 62. Margaret's mother. Tougher than she looks, a no-frills, no-nonsense kind of woman that was content to raise her girls and take life as it comes without complaint. Margaret takes after her father in that she is stubborn and set in her ways, so Peggy often finds herself mediating between the two. However, she only puts up with that for so long before she insists they sit down and deal with each other.



RAFAEL ACOSTA, 37. Originally from New Jersey, he is Tandy's new partner in Detroit. She calls him "Mr. Suave" to poke fun at his tendency to get by on his charm and good looks. Despite this, he is a serious agent and very passionate about white collar crime. He may not have a direct connection to a fraud victim like Tandy, but he naturally looks out for the little guy and roots for the underdog in all situations — especially given that his parents escaped Castro's Cuba to provide a better life for their family.



LORETTA MARTIN, 71. Tandy's mother. Fiery and tenacious, Loretta raised Tandy to fight the good fight and speak out against any kind of injustice, so it made perfect sense that her little girl would grow up to be an FBI agent. When she and her husband, Terence, fell victim to a fraudulent investment scheme, they lost their life savings and their home as a result. She was devastated and even though she doesn't talk about it anymore, is still bitter and angry — who wouldn't be? Like Tandy, she blames her husband's fatal heart attack on these tragic events.



LUCAS BRAEBURN, 42. COO of Pierce-Braeburn Securities. James' partner in crime — literally — since college. Suave, debonair, eternal bachelor. Secretly in love with Margaret, though he'd "never" act on it. Despite his public image, he is actually the less ambitious of the two partners, preferring to spend his time and money enjoying the finer things in life. This has always been his true goal, which is why he'd planned to settle into a cushy corporate job out of college that wouldn't require any entrepreneurial effort on his part. But when his best friend insisted he go into business with him, promising that Lucas would still lead a leisurely existence, he obliged his buddy. Given his record of loyalty, it's a wonder if he would have gone through with betraying James. Alas, we'll never know since he dies in the pilot.



KAREN SHARP, 40. Portfolio Manager at Pierce-Braeburn Securities. Intelligent, sophisticated, a bit dangerous. Fierce and ambitious, she worked her way up from analyst at Pierce-Braeburn, and was shooting straight for a VP spot since the day she arrived. Some might accuse her of sleeping her way to the top, given her dalliance with Lucas, but that's not her style and she doesn't need to resort to those low tactics. She advanced because she was the best analyst they'd ever seen and always had excellent advice for shaping their portfolio. She made them and their clients an extra \$1M in her first year on the job just by tipping them off to a couple prime stocks. It should be said that she's not above taking insider information either, but she's always smart about how and when she bends the rules and expects her colleagues to be as well. As for her relationship with Lucas, well... that's her weakness.

## THEMES AND CONCEPTS

*Mother of Invention* is show about family, survival, and animal instincts that explores the the ugliness of human greed and American consumerism, and plays with the theme of consumption in a dark way. It examines the lengths people will go to hold on to the American Dream and the extent of their justifications for how they go about achieving it. In a subtle way, it also explores the generational trauma of poverty along with the constant conflict of "have versus have-not."

## **FORMULA - WEEK TO WEEK**

This is a serialized drama in which Margaret will spiral further and further out of control each week as the guilt of murdering her husband's partner and best friend eats her up and her father pulls her deeper into killing. Her justifications for her actions become more extreme as time goes on, ultimately leading to a break with human decency and morality when she finds herself turning to cannibalism and fancying herself a vigilante of sorts. The show is 60% Margaret, 30% family drama (which will include glimpses into Tandy's family as well), and 10% crime investigation.

## **SEASON ONE ARC**

Season One focuses on the looming threat of James' fraud conviction and Margaret's attempts to help him stay out of prison, as well as her pursuit of Karen Sharp — the former portfolio manager of Pierce-Braeburn who sold James down the river. After Lucas' death, Margaret's guilt will turn into rage that will focus on Karen, whom she blames both for James' imprisonment and Lucas' death (after all, none of this would have happened if Karen hadn't decided to turn James in). With everything she and James have built crumbling around her, Margaret will clench to every little semblance of normalcy with an iron fist — even as the town gathers their pitchforks — and reconnecting with her father becomes a comfort in all this. However, he has his own unique moral code and soon begins to sway Margaret with it.

## **EPISODES**

- Episode 2 will pick up where the pilot left off, with James in a federal holding cell and Margaret confessing everything to her father. Lee agrees to help her, but with a few conditions — one being that she tells her mother nothing, another being that she be ready to return the favor anytime he asks. In the midst of this, we get flashbacks showing us how exactly she cleaned up the body and two things become clear: 1) She was caught on the parking lot security camera loading something into her SUV late at night (which will occupy Margaret for most of the episode as she tries to get her hands on the footage before anyone else does) 2) Karen caught a glimpse of Margaret leaving the office building when she came back to get something she forgot. We learn this at the end of the episode when she confronts Margaret with this information. In Tandy's plotline, we get her interrogation of James and also meet her ailing mother (dementia).



- Episode 3 will start with a face-off between Karen and Margaret, with Margaret denying that she was at the office when Karen says she spotted her. Convinced Margaret knows where Lucas is, she demands answers and decides to follow Margaret when she doesn't get any. Once again, Margaret goes running back to her father as he's entertaining a guest with whom he exchanges a mysterious package. James languishes in federal holding, trying to piece together what has happened in his mind while his lawyer fights Tandy's maneuvering to keep him there as long as possible. Meanwhile, Cameron is experiencing a fall from grace as his classmates take out their parents' rage on him for all James has done. At the end of the episode, James is finally released on his own recognizance.
- Episode 4 opens with Lee not-so-subtly suggesting to Margaret that Karen Sharp meet with the same end that Lucas did, otherwise she's bound to burn not only James, but Margaret, too. Margaret storms out, saying she's not like him, but the suggestion haunts her the rest of the episode — as do images of Lucas. It is obvious to James — and the rest of the family, for that matter — that something is seriously wrong with Margaret, but whenever she is questioned she covers. Meanwhile, Tandy harasses James wherever he goes, following him as her case starts to fall apart. With Lucas and Karen off the radar screen, James is the bird in the hand, but the simple fact that he's still there is enough to shed doubt on his role in the fraud. She's determined to get the evidence she needs. When Margaret returns from her parents' house, Tandy is ready and waiting for her. It's time to divide and conquer the Pierces. To make matters worse, Cameron gets suspended for fighting at school, which means there's yet another person in the house just when Margaret needs her privacy in order to track Karen's whereabouts. The episode ends with a threatening postcard from Karen.

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